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Evidence and extinction

The possibility of another hominin sharing our planet

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In September 2003, archaeologists and palaeontologists excavating in a cave named Liang Bua on the eastern Indonesian island of Flores came across the fossil remains of a diminutive hominin, conventionally described as morphologically 'primitive' or 'archaic'. This was interpreted as a new species, designated *Homo floresiensis*, and soon became nicknamed 'the hobbit'. The 'extinction date' initially proposed for the new hominin – the date for the youngest of several fossils, all found at a single site – was extraordinarily recent – about 12,000 to 13,000 years ago, thus well within the period when *Homo sapiens* was established in Indonesia.

A couple of months before the remains were unearthed, I, too, discovered something. Since 1984, I've been doing ethnographic research on Flores, investigating various topics, from marriage practices to indigenous cosmology to local knowledge of animals. Also in 1984, I began hearing about small-bodied, hairy hominoids (meaning simply 'human-like beings') that once lived on the island. Then, in June 2003, three months before the fossil discovery, I was working in the Lio region in east-central Flores, where I heard about tiny hominoids called *lai ho'a* – a name that quite accurately translates as 'ape-men'. Older Lio people, especially, described these beings in a surprisingly naturalistic way, as small-bodied, bipedal, human-like creatures standing about a metre tall and with monkey-like faces. They also described them as cultureless – lacking fire, tools and anything like a language. But what particularly impressed me about the Lio stories was the claim that these ape-men, although exceedingly rare, still survived in their region. Moreover, some people – over 30 in my final tally – claimed to have seen one.

The possibility of coexistence

In October of the following year, 2004, I was therefore astounded to read about the discovery of *Homo floresiensis*. Not only were palaeoanthropological reconstructions of *floresiensis* remarkably like the Lio ape-men, but there was no possibility that what Lio villagers had told me about them derived from news of the fossil discovery, in part because the fossils were found at the other end of the island. Was it possible, I wondered, that these ape-men and the prehistoric 'hobbits' were connected – even the same species? And if not, what could account for such an extraordinary coincidence?

To answer these questions, I continued fieldwork during eight further visits to the Lio region between 2005 and 2018. Information I collected during these subsequent trips only confirmed my initial impression of a surprisingly close resemblance between these tiny hominoids and the equally small-bodied *floresiensis*. Based on this evidence, I published *Between ape and human* (Forth 2022), a book exploring the possibility that *Homo floresiensis* or a related species has survived until very recently and managed to coexist with *Homo sapiens*. In other words, I began to question whether we were not the only member of the genus *Homo* living on the planet today.

Besides what I learned from the Lio, circumstantial factors suggest such coexistence is not impossible. For example, the fossil hominin is still known only from a single location: the discovery site in western Flores. Yet evidence for *floresiensis* or their predecessors existing on Flores Island for tens or hundreds of thousands of years confirms that the species could not have lived only at the discovery site. That said, there are several reasons – not all particularly scientific – why a professional anthropologist might choose to avoid such a topic. First, it falls within the sphere of cryptozoology, a subject regularly debunked as a pseudo-science. Second, people in all parts of the world speak of small-bodied human-like creatures, like European elves or fairies. So, sceptics might ask – not unreasonably – why shouldn't the Flores hominoids be another instance of these?

The discovery of *Homo floresiensis* itself partly answers these concerns. Cryptids – like Bigfoot and Yeti, for example – have not been reported near remains of geologically recent species that look very much like them. Supernatural beings reminiscent of elves are a different matter. An anonymous reader of my book says they found Flores Islanders' stories about ape-men intriguing, but they had to conclude that the creatures were no more than the imagination of 'primitive people'. Sadly, such a verdict is shared by many academics – even if they wouldn't express themselves in quite these terms.

However, the view is challenged by the findnigs of both ethnography and cognitive science, particularly by the differences many non-Western people recognize between purely supernatural or spiritual beings and empirical animals. So, in my 2022 book, I spent a whole chapter demonstrating that Lio people recognize significant ontological differences between spirits and ape-men. Briefly, they describe forest spirits, souls of the dead and other supernatural entities as things that – to translate their own words – 'consist only of spirit', 'lack bodies' and, for this reason, are normally invisible. Ape-men, by contrast, do indeed have bodies. And though few people have seen one, they describe the hominoids as visible to everyone – just like more familiar animals that occupy their territory.

As my wording might suggest, the Lio regard ape-men not as human, like themselves, but as a kind of animal, albeit an uncannily human-like animal. And while some people credit them with supernatural powers – like the ability to disappear or mystically harm people without physical contact – Lio attribute the same powers to scientifically recognized although locally rare species like

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Fig. 1. *An artist's impression of* Homo floresiensis *by Inge van Noortwijk, based on available morphological information.*

This is an abbreviated version of a lecture delivered to the University of Cambridge Archaeological Field Club on 6 February 2023.

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dugongs (Asian 'sea-cows'), coconut crabs (*Birgus latro*) and freshwater turtles. In fact, in Lio cosmology, the last two creatures are expressly linked with forest spirits, whereas ape-men are not.

Evidence and extinction

In writing *Between ape and human*, my primary purpose was to explore ways local statements about Flores ape-men might be explained, other than as statements reflecting observations or general knowledge of an actual species closely corresponding to local descriptions. Thus, I discuss whether ape-men might reflect long-tailed macaques (the only monkey species documented for Flores) and, especially, exceptionally large or odd-looking specimens. Another possibility is an undiscovered species or population of apes that has escaped the attention of academic zoologists. And yet another is that ape-men might be a rarely contacted, physically and culturally distinct population of anatomically modern humans – like the short-bodied, traditionally forest-dwelling Asian people called 'Negritos' who live in the Philippines and peninsular Malaysia.

However, in each instance, these alternative hypotheses find little support in anthropological or zoological evidence. So, in the end, I conclude that the best explanation – the most parsimonious interpretation of Lio statements about ape-men, and particularly eyewitness reports – is that they accurately reflect experiences of creatures that actually exist and are possibly descendants of *Homo floresiensis* or, given more recent fossil evidence (Van den Bergh et al. 2016), descendants of an equally small-bodied collateral species.

In reaching these conclusions, I've analysed what Flores Islanders told me, critically and even sceptically, but nonetheless as statements about a possible empirical reality. In doing so, I treat the evidence of ethnography on a par with the material findings of palaeoanthropology. And this is where critics are likely to take exception. Cited in an article in a popular science periodical (Margaritoff 2022), one palaeoanthropologist is quoted as saying that 'the idea that there's a large primate that is unobserved on this island and surviving in a population that can sustain itself is pretty close to zero'. In part, this is a variant of the old chestnut that 'if [creature X] exists, someone would have seen one by now'. But it ignores that over 30 Lio people claim to have seen specimens, most alive but some dead, and detailed descriptions of what they saw occupy four chapters of my book. A non-anthropological reviewer in the *Wall Street Journal* (Barash 2022) claims the book contains 'nothing substantial' to show that ape-men exist. What 'substantial' presumably means is physical evidence that could support my argument. So, in both instances, it comes down to the question of what constitutes evidence. Since I am neither a zoologist nor an osteologist, it is also a question of disciplinary authority.

Evidence, of course, is defined by the methodology governing any form of enquiry, and this naturally varies from one discipline to the next. As touched on in a more recent review of my book (Strathern & Stewart 2023), for anthropology, one question concerning evidence comes down to when and why we might take observations of creatures reported by non-scientists, and especially by non-Western people like Lio villagers, as reflecting animals that would be equally accepted as 'real' by academic scientists.

There are several reasons for doing so. One is the numerous cases where local people were familiar with large mammals and other animals long before Europeans observed and documented them in the 19th and 20th centuries. Besides the oft-cited central African okapi, examples include both species of gorilla (large primates if ever there were) and, on Flores and neighbouring islands, the Komodo dragon, the world's largest lizard. In addition, some species discovered as fossils and presumed extinct have later been found alive. The best-known example are the archaic fish named coelacanths, including an Indonesian species found in a fish market on Sulawesi Island in 1997. Both this and the first species, caught in 1938 in South African waters, were already well known to local people. Both already had local names, both turned up regularly in fishermen's nets and both were treated as just another kind of fish.

Yet creatures known to local people before gaining scientific acceptance are hardly exceptional. For large vertebrates, such precedence could even be called normal, and this doesn't only apply to non-humans. One example of fantastic beings whose physical existence was doubted by Westerners before the mid-19th century is the short-statured African people called 'Pygmies', a name drawn from ancient Greek legends about similarly small-bodied people. But the age of anthropological discovery is not over. In palaeoanthropology, nothing demonstrates this more clearly than the unexpected discovery of the physically primitive fossil species *Homo floresiensis* in 2003, and, following this, other small-bodied non-*sapiens* hominins with similarly recent dates overlapping with anatomically modern humans, including *Homo luzonensis* in the Philippines and the Red Deer hominins in southwestern China.

As for phenotypically distinctive populations of *Homo sapiens*, another case comparable to the Lio ape-men and their connection with *floresiensis* was recently reported from Taiwan (Hung et al. 2022). This comprised fossils dating to 6,000 years ago that closely resemble the present-day Southeast Asian pygmoid peoples known as 'Negritos', which morphologically most closely resemble Negritos in the Philippines. In connection with the Lio hominoids and *Homo floresiensis*, the central relevance of the discovery lies in the fact that indigenous Formosans – the non-Chinese aboriginals of Taiwan – have for centuries been telling stories about small, dark-skinned, mountain-dwelling 'dwarves'. Moreover, for over 100 years, anthropologists have speculated that, rather than imaginary beings, these dwarves may reflect a former population of Taiwanese Negritos. So, the authors of the 2022 study concluded that the Negrito-like remains prove these earlier speculations to have been correct.

Regional explanations

However, there are other interpretations of the stories. As aboriginal Formosans and most Indonesians, including Flores Islanders, speak distantly related languages, all classified as Austronesian, the dwarves and the ape-men could reflect cultural affinity rather than experiences of similar empirical realities. Yet fossil evidence for Negritos in Taiwan provides a more straightforward explanation for the legendary dwarves. And since the Lio were talking about ape-men long before the discovery of *Homo floresiensis* – as confirmed by mentions of their local name (*lai ho'a*) in Arndt's 1933 dictionary – there's reason to believe these hominoids could provide a parallel instance of what is often called 'folklore' reflecting a physical anthropological reality.

To be sure, the fossils from Taiwan and Flores differ significantly in age. Taiwanese Negrito remains dated to 6,000 years ago, whereas the most recent date for the *floresiensis* fossils is no longer 12,000 years ago, as initially proposed, but 52,000 years ago. However, as *floresiensis* remains have only been found at one site, we don't know how much longer the species may have survived elsewhere – a fact also recognized by the researchers who reported the older dates (Sutikna et al. 2016). Yet here a curiosity arises. Aboriginal Formosans regard their legendary dwarves as extinct. But even if the Negritos, their

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Fig. 2. *A Lio village looks towards a distant spot where he once saw an ape-man.*
Fig. 3. *Cast of the cranium of the* floresiensis *holotype.*

probable prototype, disappeared several thousand years ago, Formosans would have been in contact with them far more recently than modern humans on Flores could have been with *Homo floresiensis*.

Of course, this assumes that the Flores hominins died out before 6,000 years ago, whereas evidence from 17th- and 18th-century Chinese chronicles suggests that Taiwanese Negritos may have survived in small numbers until just a few hundred years ago (Hung et al. 2022). However, as depicted in Formosan legends, the dwarves appear to be rather more supernatural than ape-men as described by Lio villagers. Given that objects and events tend to receive a more fantastic representation the further they are removed in space or time, if Flores Islanders stopped seeing *floresiensis* tens of thousands of years ago, we should expect things to be the other way around. So, despite the divergent dates for the Taiwanese and Flores fossils, comparing the two cultural traditions favours a more recent survival of non-*sapiens* hominins on Flores.

It is now accepted that *Homo sapiens* has shared the earth with two or more other species of *Homo* several times in our evolutionary past, and there's no biological reason why they should not do so even at present – despite the philosophical difficulty many have with conceiving of such coexistence. Possibility, however, is one thing; probability is another. In talking about the present survival of descendants of *Homo floresiensis*, probability depends on what one counts as evidence. So if we're prepared to admit statements by Flores Islanders that suggest that one or more eyewitnesses are accurately describing what they saw when they encountered local hominoids, then the survival of a population of small-bodied non-*sapiens* hominins on Flores is hardly improbable.

Counterintuitive probability

But probability also depends on what assumptions you are willing to accept. Critics who assume Flores is not big enough to accommodate two separate hominin species or that the island's resources are insufficient to maintain both (as does the anthropologist cited above) may not recognize that, unlike modern humans, *floresiensis* was primarily vegetarian. Lio villagers describe contemporary ape-men in the same way. More importantly, they fail to consider that, like the Formosan 'dwarves', the Flores ape-men are described as mountain-dwellers. In contrast, modern humans have long been concentrated in coastal regions. The same point was made by Mike Morwood, the Australian leader of the *floresiensis* discovery team, when he, too, entertained the hominin's possible modern survival (Morwood & Van Oosterzee 2007).

According to another questionable assumption, modern humans meeting *floresiensis* would have exterminated their smaller cousins. To be clear, this means we, as a species, extinguished the little hominin, not some socio-economically defined segment of humanity, as has been blamed for modern species losses (Pálsson 2023: 1). A particularly revealing instance of this 'deadly humans' hypothesis comes from Peter Bellwood (2017: 58), a highly respected and accomplished prehistorian, who further claims that, because it was difficult to imagine *Homo sapiens* not wiping out the other hominin, the initial dates for *floresiensis* 'raised problems'. Bellwood, therefore, expressly welcomed the revised 'extinction date' of over 50,000 years ago, as this considerably reduced the possible chronological overlap between the two species.

Yet, apart from the possibility that the two hominins occupied different habitats and did not compete over resources – and leaving aside the case that our species is not so inherently homicidal as the assumption suggests – Bellwood's argument betrays an older, lineal view of hominin evolution, wherein more 'advanced' replaced less advanced species in a single line of descent. Ironically, it is this view that the discovery of *floresiensis* – and later other small-bodied hominins, like the Philippine *Homo luzonensis* and, in Africa, the older and larger-bodied but still morphologically distinct *Homo naledi* – has done so much to refute.

But Professor Bellwood is by no means the only scholar to reveal a lingering unilinear bias. In several respects more similar to Australopithecines and even modern apes, *floresiensis* is unquestionably a separate species from us. Palaeoanthropologist Peter Brown wanted to assign the species to a new genus, *Sundanthropus*. Mike Morwood disagreed (Morwood & Van Oosterzee 2007: 146). But, very tellingly, a reason he gave for favouring the inclusion of *floresiensis* in *Homo* was the species' recent dates!

Conclusion

I will confess that, intuitively, the current survival of a descendant of *Homo floresiensis* also seems improbable to me, even though it provides the most parsimonious explanation for what Flores Islanders say about ape-men and their resemblance to the fossil hominin. But I'm reminded of two things: first, that many scientifically accepted propositions are counter-intuitive (the earth revolving around the sun is a typical example); and, second, that probability is vastly different from actuality. It's been argued, for instance, that the likelihood of organic life emerging in our galaxy was extraordinarily low (MacAskill 2022: 118), so the evolution of *Homo sapiens* was lower still. Yet here we are – and so, too, are fossil remains of *floresiensis*, whose discovery, like that of most palaeontological species, represents yet another kind of improbability. Could we, then, be in for another surprise? ●

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